

# **Movie Review: The Greatest Showman is Built on a House of Lies — But It's Entertaining as Hell!**

2016's *The Founder* took a pretty incisive and honest look at the American Dream. It wasn't afraid to peer at the shitty underbelly of success and note that it often owes as much to hard work and innovation as it does to back-stabbing and moral compromise. Hugh Jackman's *The Greatest Showman* also takes a look at the American Dream — but it comes to a very different conclusion, which is that the American Dream is a wonderful, joyous thing!

*The Greatest Showman* re-imagines the life of consummate huckster P.T. Barnum as a sparkling feel-good pop musical that celebrates a quintessential American success story: the rise of a rags-to-riches visionary who makes it to the top through the power of dreaming big and never giving up. Along the way he helps a band of outcasts feel like they belong and have a place in this world. Wrapped in a bubble gum sheathe of razzle-dazzle, catchy songs and elaborately choreographed dance sequences, the movie is a testament to the empty spectacle of American showbusiness's love affair with itself.

The film goes straight to the Disney/Dickens template of the poor orphan boy with big dreams who is challenged by a disapproving society and arrogant elites, only to overcome these trials with a rag-tag band of misfits and become the greatest showman of them all. The film's smash hit anthem, "This is Me", is a full-throated declaration that it's OK to be different (like if you are a woman and have a beard) and celebrates the bravery of embracing your quirks even in the face of a society that doesn't accept you. It's a fine uplifting message and the song is catchy as hell. But I have one small problem with it, along with the rest of the themes buoying this film. It's all based on dastardly lies!

The real P.T. Barnum was not a Nicholas Nickleby stand-in for the aspirations of big dreamers in the lower and middle classes. He was a huckster, an exploitative charlatan and a snake-oil salesman. His true visionary genius was in realizing that there was an enormous market of gullible Americans out there waiting to be dazzled by the bizarre and the macabre and taken in by elaborate and shocking hoaxes. Famously, one of his first claims to fame was when he sewed the head and torso of a monkey to the tail of a fish and called it a mermaid. This anecdote was conveniently omitted from the film for some reason. It also glossed over the fact that Barnum began his career by purchasing a blind, paralyzed slave woman and then put her on exhibition and claimed she was the 161-year-old nurse of George Washington.

Now, I am not really a fan of retroactively judging people who lived centuries ago by the moral standards of our time. But even a cursory look at Barnum's real biography makes it painfully obvious that his success came from a willingness to exploit and defraud people. His shows were not celebrations of unique identity in a conformist world. They were a chance for him to extract money

from hulking idiots in exchange for letting them gawk at people suffering from gigantism and other maladies. When a regular case of dwarfism was deemed not thrilling or obscene enough, he had no compunctions about defrauding his audience with trickery (this is hinted at in the film, but is played off as an endearingly rueful character trait).

The man was a straight-up fraudster. And he parlayed this talent into one of the great American myths of our time — the archetype of the consummate showman, the visionary genius who uses his marketing acumen and his showmanship and his charisma and his drive and his dreams to create brand new markets out of whole cloth that didn't exist before. And this myth is fine, as far as it goes — but it leaves out a crucial element which is that along with all that, the consummate showman is exploiting people at every turn. In Barnum's case he exploited the buttoned-down 19th century social desire to be scandalized and titillated, he exploited the gullibility of the public, and he exploited the people working for him by putting them on display so that people could ogle what were often serious medical conditions in exchange for money.

The film steers clear of any of these issues, and instead just aims to dazzle us with spectacle. And I have to say — the spectacle is a hell of a lot of fun! At its heart this is a damn entertaining, fun piece of theater and though it totally re-imagines Barnum, avoiding the controversy and the interesting bits in order to give us a paint-by-numbers protagonist we can cheer for, it does succeed as a slick musical.

I prefer musicals in the style of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelley, where the camera would just roll and shoot long takes intended to capture the magic of those guys when they moved. But you can't expect that in a modern musical, I suppose, and all the hyper-kinetic quick cuts (probably to obscure the real dancing ability of the stars) were in line with the overall spastic energy and momentum of the film. The soundtrack is diabolically good, and the choreography excellent. There is even a cameo as a mustached bartender from Daniel "Cloud" Campos, probably the best dancer in the world, who helped Jackman train for the part. The period setting is superb (and I am a sucker for a good period piece).

The Greatest Showman is thus loads of fun. It's energetic, it's uplifting, it has great music and great sequences. It is also hagiographic revisionism, to be sure, that avoids engaging with the reality of Barnum's life in any meaningful way. I felt this was a missed opportunity, especially since we are currently living in an age where a huckster embodying many of the same traits that made Barnum legendary has defrauded his way into the White House by selling the American people the same kind of bunkum that Barnum peddled. It's amazing how little some fundamental aspects of American society have changed over the centuries, how we are still susceptible to manipulative hustlers as long as they conceal their true intent under a veneer of compelling showmanship. We love to swallow that bullshit as long as it's shiny enough, and indeed even I found myself willing to more or less ignore the film's distortions of the truth because it entertained the hell out of me for two hours. This peculiar

weakness of the American mind to ignore uncomfortable truths as long as we are being dazzled and entertained and stupefied — THAT would have been a really interesting road for the film to explore.

But alas, it did not and in the end we just have to content ourselves with hearing “This is Me” played on the radio every twenty fucking minutes for the rest of our lives.